



# Online Music Stores



**The proliferation of online music stores has given consumers an unprecedented amount of choice when it comes to buying music. But which one provides the best service? Will Byers finds out**

**T**he MP3 format has had an extraordinary effect on the way we listen to music. Simply by reducing audio files to around 1MB per minute, MP3 and other similar formats have made it easy to store music on a PC, transfer it via the internet and put vast quantities of it on portable players.

MP3 has changed the way we acquire music, too. Peer-to-peer file-sharing services made it easy to acquire music quickly and for free. But these services are falling out of favour with the music industry and with music fans who want reliable audio quality, a virus-free PC and a clear conscience.

There is now a realistic alternative, with new legal online stores launching on a monthly basis. Downloads account for 3.6 per cent of music purchases. In an industry that's worth £5 billion a year in the UK alone, that amounts to big business.

But should you join the rush? There are some great benefits to online music, but plenty of pitfalls too. If you want instant access to over a million songs, you can get just that for £10 a month – but stop paying, and all that music will disappear. If you want a song but not the whole album, 79p per track is far more attractive than £3.50 for a CD single with two dreadful b-sides, and even better

deals are available if you know where to look.

But unless you're careful, you may find that your downloaded music won't play on your PC or MP3 player. This feature will help you get the most out of the current crop of music download stores.

## CHANGING ATTITUDES

Digital music has been freely available online for many years. Napster, in its first incarnation, was just one of many file-sharing sites that allowed its users to search for and download music from millions of other users' hard disks. The downside – depending on your point of view – was that record companies

## Distributing your own music online

**N**owadays musicians have cheap technology available to produce excellent recordings at a fraction of the past cost. But is it any easier to get your own music on iTunes Music Store than it is to get it into high street HMV stores?

Some online stores offer promotions for unsigned bands. Virgin Digital sponsored London Now, a series of concerts by unsigned acts, with downloads from the bands in the online store. Tiscali has a showcase project ([www.tiscali.co.uk/music/showcase](http://www.tiscali.co.uk/music/showcase)) that takes new acts, streams live gigs and pushes their products in the store.

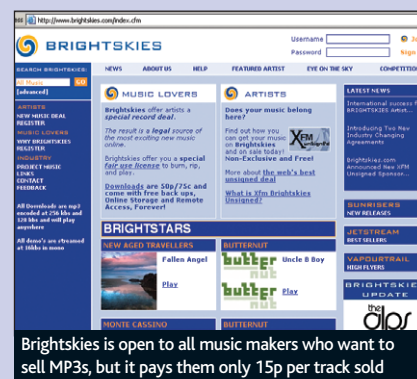
However, this affects only a few chosen artists. Napster told us it "would be unable to process content from small labels or bands on a one-to-one basis". This was confirmed by James Kylo, general manager at the Association of Independent Music (AIM), an organisation that represents UK independent record labels. He told us that the process is no different to the established system where a store will not touch

an artist without a distributor. However, AIM has negotiated blanket deals with many of the major stores and will represent any independent record label, no matter how small, with an annual membership fee.

Bypassing the major stores, Brightskies ([www.brightskies.com](http://www.brightskies.com)) will upload your music to its website for free, but takes a 35p cut from each 50p download. Vitaminic ([www.vitaminic.com](http://www.vitaminic.com)) lets you upload to its site for free as long as you don't charge for downloads. If you want to cash in, you'll need to pay a \$60 (around £34) annual subscription, which allows you to upload 100 tracks and charge for them.

Alternatively, you can go it alone. It's easy to give away MP3s on a website, but if you want to make money, Actinic Audio Store software will help you build a store that charges for downloads, mail order CDs and other merchandise (see *What's New*, *Shopper* July 2005 for a review). However, you won't get the marketing benefits of the big stores.

It's not all bad news, but as AIM points out, the biggest misconception was that the new digital world was going to let musicians make the music and sit back and let the money roll in. It's not that simple, but there are opportunities to be taken.



Brightskies is open to all music makers who want to sell MP3s, but it pays them only 15p per track sold



and artists received no revenue from new listeners owning their music. No legal alternative was available at the time.

It seems the music industry was a little slack in developing legitimate services. Edgar Bronfman, CEO of Warner Music, recently conceded that record labels had made mistakes by refusing to accept that the internet, and downloads in particular, would be central to the future of the industry. This admission was part of Warner's announcement that it is launching a record label that will release music online only. Since the remarkable success of iTunes Music Store (only launched in Europe in June 2004), legal download sites have proliferated.

However, it's not just the music industry that has shifted its perspective on music downloads; customers have too. The inherent risks of file-sharing software, which makes its users' computers vulnerable to all sorts of dodgy files, viruses and hackers, is great motivation for digital music fans to

switch to legitimate sites. Some customers have also cited a conscience regarding artists receiving their dues as reason to fork out for a legal download. Meanwhile, the vast expansion of broadband internet access has meant that buying music online has also become a convenient alternative to heading to the shops to buy a CD.

However, perhaps the biggest change in listeners' attitudes is that MP3, WMA and other types of music files aren't just worthless copies of audio CDs; instead, they have a value in their own right. Slowly but surely, listeners are accepting the idea that music files are worth paying for, especially if they cost less than the equivalent CD.

### MORE POWER TO YOU

But how much value does a CD really hold? After all, a CD comes with a booklet of artwork, lyrics and production credits, it will play in PCs, hi-fis and car stereos and can also be used to create digital music files, giving the best of both worlds. Not

everyone is keen to give up all this just to save a couple of pounds. Some people will take some persuading, and this is understandable; it involves a leap of faith to embrace a new way to buy and listen to music. But there are some tangible benefits in choosing digital music files over CDs.

Most music download stores allow a song to be previewed for around 30 seconds, meaning that you don't ever have to buy music without hearing it first. Once you have bought your first song, the store can recommend music similar to the style you have purchased. The stores are very helpful in this respect – after all, they want you to spend your money there. Many sites also have celebrity playlists and recommendations. Currently on iTunes Store you can find out what McFly are listening to (The Cure) and also The Cure (not McFly – sorry fellas).

This opens up a wonderful new world of informed browsing, helped by the fact that most stores' catalogues are immense. Forget 1,000 songs in your pocket – you can have one million at the

#### REVIEW ONLINE MUSIC STORE

## EMUSIC

RATING ★★★★★

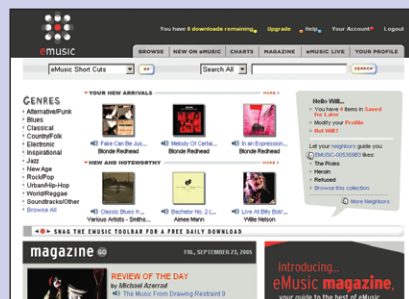
DETAILS [www.emusic.com](http://www.emusic.com)

PRICE PER TRACK \$0.32 to \$0.49 (around 18p to 28p)

eMusic is a specialist site for independent music and, as such, it had only three of the 10 albums in our test. However, it excels in its chosen field, with its range of alternative artists outstripping its rivals.

Reviews and recommendations from alternative music heroes (legendary indie writer Michael Azerrad at the time of writing) make for interesting browsing, as does the passionate input from customers. The 30-second previews also help you decide if you want to buy a track.

The optional download manager software is easy to use and can be customised to store MP3s wherever you choose. Because there is no built-in playback software, files will open in your default player. Downloads are high bit-rate MP3s, meaning excellent sound quality and no DRM headaches. Purchases are the cheapest here, with bundles of tracks (40 for \$10, around £6, up to 90 for \$20, around £11) working out at 14p per track. However, these prices are charged as a monthly subscription – you can't pay for single tracks – so unless you have a large appetite for independent music, you may struggle to get your money's worth.



#### REVIEW ONLINE MUSIC STORE

## APPLE iTunes Music Store

RATING ★★★★★

DETAILS [www.itunes.co.uk](http://www.itunes.co.uk)

PRICE PER TRACK 79p

Apple has had time to get its user interface sorted, and this is one of iTunes Music Store's main strengths. The iTunes software makes it easy to manage and browse your own music library, and it's even a cinch to share iTunes libraries across a network.

The range of content in the store is impressive, with seven of our 10 test albums in stock. It's well presented, too, with celebrity playlists, themed collections, staff picks, charts and new releases as well as a good search facility. Tracks tend to be around 79p but albums usually work out cheaper (for example, £7.90 for the 22-track Kanye West album *Late Registration*). Songs can be previewed for 30 seconds, but no rental options are available.

The DRM limitations are reasonable, particularly as PCs can be 'deauthorized' to free up one of the five licences for use on a new PC. However, tracks are compatible only with Apple's iPod range of players. The iPod's massive success means that this is hardly an obstacle for most people. But having said that, if you do decide to go down the iTunes/iPod route and music rental catches on, you may end up feeling a bit left out.



#### REVIEW ONLINE MUSIC STORE

## NAPSTER Napster

RATING ★★★★★

DETAILS [www.napster.co.uk](http://www.napster.co.uk)

PRICE PER TRACK 68p for a package, 79p for single tracks

Napster prides itself on its 1.6 million-track catalogue, which it claims is the largest in the world. It stocked a respectable six out of the 10 albums in our straw poll. The software is easy to navigate and there's a friendly tutorial for new users.

There are three ways to use the Napster store. Napster Light works much like iTunes Store: songs are bought, usually at 79p each, and 30-second previews are available. The standard package, called Napster, costs £10 per month and gives access to the entire Napster catalogue to stream directly from the store or download and use offline for as long as you keep your subscription. Napster To Go costs £15, and allows tracks to be transferred to portable players; see [www.playsforsure.com](http://www.playsforsure.com) for compatible models. Subscribers can also buy music to keep at slightly discounted prices, allowing them to burn tracks to CD.

The idea of losing your music collection if you stop subscribing may be a turn-off, but for ardent music fans the convenience of instant, unlimited access for a fixed price should mean they'll never want to cancel their subscription.





click of a mouse. Unless you live near Oxford Street in London, the choice offered online is likely to outdo your local record shop.

But is the choice as liberating as it sounds, or is it the same mass-market popstars being pushed on our desktops as well as our TVs and radios? How easy is it to find new music? Napster and Virgin Digital said their recommendations are generated by software that tracks sales and other customers' choices. But Virgin said it is inevitable that banners and recommendations will soon be up for sale.

Another issue is that digital files use lossy compression (for more on this, see *How it Works*, *Shopper* December 2005), which means they don't match up to CD quality. To many people, this isn't an issue as the drop in quality is barely noticeable. Even so, it's understandable that people may be unwilling to accept a regression in audio quality without a significant price drop.

Most contentious is the issue of digital rights management, known as DRM. The ease by which

files can be burned to CD and distributed online has led the music industry to develop ways to limit what you can do with the files. But this also limits what honest customers can do with music they have paid for. For more on this issue, see the 'Digital rights management' box on page 227.

#### AVAILABLE TO RENT

It costs practically nothing for online stores to furnish you with a downloaded track. What you're really paying for is permission to listen to the music it contains. This elimination of manufacturing costs opens up all sorts of new ways to pay for music. If your CD collection is full of discs you've listened to once and probably won't listen to again, this could be extremely good news.

Some sites allow you to pay just 1p to listen to a track, streaming it directly from the website. Others offer subscription services where you can listen to as much different music as you like, as long as you pay a monthly fee.

Legend has it that the average CD is played two and-a-half times. If this is even close to true then most of us are deluding ourselves about how much use we get from our bought CDs. If you buy one album each month for around £10 each, in a year you have 12 CDs with which you can do whatever you like. For the same money, you can have access to over one million songs at certain online stores. However, you will only be able to listen to these from your computer and certain compatible wireless media receivers (see our Labs test of wireless media players in *Shopper* December 2005 for details). It will cost you another £5 a month to be able to put them on a portable player. You can't burn songs to CD for the living room or car, or own them in any way – they disappear as soon as you stop paying. The difference in the amount of music you can get for your money is staggering, but are you ready to rent music like this?

We spoke to Napster and Virgin Digital, both of which provide subscription services. While they

#### REVIEW ONLINE MUSIC STORE

### SONY SonyConnect

RATING ★★

DETAILS [www.connect-europe.com](http://www.connect-europe.com)

PRICE PER TRACK 89p to 99p

Sony's software is no more difficult to use than other stores' software, but it looks clunky, with too much information trying to be helpful but ultimately giving a cluttered feel.

The range of music is decent, stocking six out of the 10 albums in our test, and the standard 30-second previews are available. Sony doesn't seem to compete very hard with its rivals on price, though. The basic cost of a track is 99p, the most expensive here. Albums are usually £8, again losing out on price to some other services.

As usual, Sony stubbornly goes it alone with its use of the ATRAC-3 format. This delivers excellent sound quality, but downloaded tracks will play only on Sony's SonicStage software and Sony portable players unless you burn them to CD and re-import them in a different format. Admittedly, this is no different to iTunes Music Store's limitation to iTunes software and iPod players, and Sony's range of players is just as attractive, too, including our current Best Buy, the NW-HD5. However, playback on just three computers seems particularly stingy. At least these licences can be transferred from one PC to another, rather than just expiring when your computer does.



#### REVIEW ONLINE MUSIC STORE

### TISCALI Tiscali Music

RATING ★★

DETAILS [www.tiscali.co.uk/music/](http://www.tiscali.co.uk/music/)

sonicselector

PRICE PER TRACK 69p to 79p

You only need a small Windows Media Player plug-in to connect to Tiscali Music. Various other stores including MSN Music and Big Noise Music use the same underlying OD2 engine, so music from all these stores will play in Windows Media Player.

Songs are a smidgeon cheaper than average at 69p to 79p and albums are £7. Choice, however, seemed poorer than usual, and it had only four of the 10 albums in our test. Searching for music is also a little confusing, with some of the artists categorised by surname and others by forename.

One bonus is the clear DRM information; just click Rights Information next to every track to view the restrictions. Purchased WMAs are compatible with a range of portable players listed at [www.playsforsure.com](http://www.playsforsure.com).

As with other stores that use the OD2 engine, most tracks can be streamed for 1p a listen. This is ideal if you're tempted by the idea of renting music but aren't sure if you'll use it enough to justify Napster and Virgin Digital's £10-a-month deals. However, these rented tracks can't be put on a portable player.



#### REVIEW ONLINE MUSIC STORE

### VIRGIN Virgin Digital

RATING ★★★★★

DETAILS [www.virgindigital.com](http://www.virgindigital.com)

PRICE PER TRACK 79p

Virgin tells you that it is a "lucky bunch of puppies" for your custom during installation. The software is easy to use, with purchased tracks appearing in My Collection from which playlists and CDs can be created. However, rather than having a built-in Help option, there's just an option to email the support team, who we suspect may have their work cut out.

There are over one million tracks on offer, including seven of the 10 albums in our test. Most of the songs are 79p but albums are often cheaper, with the new Supergrass album costing just £5.29.

Virgin Digital's Music Club is a subscription service similar to that of Napster. For £10 per month, over a million tracks are available to play from your computer. For £15, you can transfer these to a compatible player (see [www.playsforsure.com](http://www.playsforsure.com) for supported models). You'll still need to buy tracks outright to burn them to CD, though.

The Music Club service is an attractive proposition for anyone who has an insatiable appetite for new music, and even those who aren't quite ready to abandon their CD player can still get some good deals.







admit that the popularity of subscription lags far behind à la carte purchases, Napster claims that its biggest revenue generator is the £10 monthly subscription option. Rudy Tambala, head of Virgin Digital for the UK and Eire, sees it as Virgin's job to educate people and, in fairness, trialling these services is a persuasive argument. Having access to such a staggering amount of music is difficult to relinquish once you've had a taste of it. With time, it may be possible to get used to not owning the music. After all, if you stick with monthly subscriptions for the rest of your life, why would you need to own it?

If this takes off, it will signal a seismic shift in listening habits. People would not worry about

owning the music any more than they do when listening to the radio. The difference is that these stations make the listener the DJ, with a choice of one million songs.

### THE END OF THE CD?

Music downloads are fun and can be great value, but we wouldn't recommend you throw away your CD player just yet. Mail order websites such as Amazon and Play offer a massive range of music CDs at discounted prices. This often works out as cheap as paying for downloads, with artwork and album information included too. It's also easy to convert a CD to MP3 format and put on a portable player with no compatibility issues to worry about.

It's possible that we are just hung up on the idea of owning a physical product. The package is only there to make the music more attractive, so letting go of this can be seen as removing an unnecessary layer of marketing. With the help of broadband, perhaps the convenience of owning music at the push of a button will beat waiting for the postman or traipsing to the shops. Subscription services take this a step further.

Once you have dipped your toe in the water, it's not difficult to imagine how you could soon change the way you consume music, having a perpetual choice rather than deliberating over what to do with a limited CD budget.

### HOW WE TESTED

We tested six well-known online music stores to determine which provided the best service and the greatest choice. The results give some idea of each service's breadth of content. We selected 10 albums at random (below) from different genres, including a few difficult-to-find recordings.

As a comparison, Amazon scored 10 out of 10; prices in the new and used section often undercut a downloaded version.

- **Antony and the Johnsons** I am a Bird Now
- **Cesaria Evora** Café Atlantico
- **De La Soul** 3 Feet High and Rising
- **Frank Sinatra** In the Wee Small Hours
- **Gorillaz** Demon Days
- **Masters of Reality** Sunrise on the Sufferbus
- **Miles Davis** Birth of the Cool
- **Shostakovich** Symphony no 5
- **Tom Waits** Swordfishtrombones
- **Yo La Tengo** I Can Hear the Heart Beating as One **CS**



## Digital rights management

The record industry has woken up to the fact that internet downloads provide a way to make rather than lose money, but it's still nervous that legal downloads may be shared illegally. The result is digital rights management (DRM), which limits how music files are played or copied.

DRM can render tracks unplayable after a fixed number of plays or after a certain date. More commonly, though, it limits how many computers tracks will play on, how many players they'll transfer to and how many times they can be burnt to audio CD.

Specific limitations range from the enlightened to the draconian, but they're almost always annoying. After all, audio CDs can be played anywhere and transferred to any other format. By contrast, if your DRM licence permits playback on just three PCs, once you've played the music you've paid for at home, at work and on a notebook PC, your next PC upgrade won't be able to access any of it. Currently, only iTunes and Sony Connect allow licences to be transferred from one PC to another, while Napster's subscription accounts can be used on an unlimited number of PCs but only one at a time.

Another DRM irritation is that software is needed to manage it, and this means tracks

bought from a specific store are usually only playable with that store's software and on a limited range of portable players. As such, your choice of player could dictate your choice of online store, which will be annoying if you buy an iPod the week before one of iTunes Music Store's rivals slashes its prices.

While all the stores assured us that they would refund or replace a file if it was faulty, none would commit to anything other than dealing with each problem case by case when it came to DRM misunderstandings. Napster's Adam Howorth said: "If you buy an iPod and are disappointed to discover it doesn't work with Napster, then please take your complaint to Apple which refuses to license its technology."

There is a simple way around such problems, though. All stores allow at least a few CD burns, whereupon they can be ripped back on to your computer in any file format you choose. While this recompression will lower the audio quality, the difference is usually negligible.

It is unlikely that DRM will disappear, but it should be more transparent. Five out of the six stores reviewed here use DRM, but of these, only Tiscali Music provided clear information on DRM limitations next to every track.

| STORE                        | EMUSIC                                             | APPLE ITUNES MUSIC STORE                                          | NAPSTER                                                                                                             | SONYCONNECT                                                        | TISCALI MUSIC                                                                                    | VIRGIN DIGITAL                                                   |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rating                       | ★★★★★                                              | ★★★★★                                                             | ★★★★★                                                                                                               | ★★★                                                                | ★★★★                                                                                             | ★★★★★                                                            |
| Details                      | <a href="http://www.emusic.com">www.emusic.com</a> | <a href="http://www.itunes.co.uk">www.itunes.co.uk</a>            | <a href="http://www.napster.co.uk">www.napster.co.uk</a>                                                            | <a href="http://www.connect-europe.com">www.connect-europe.com</a> | <a href="http://www.tiscali.co.uk/music/sonicselector">www.tiscali.co.uk/music/sonicselector</a> | <a href="http://www.virgindigital.com">www.virgindigital.com</a> |
| System requirements          | Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP or Mac OS X               | Windows 2000/XP, Pentium 500MHz, 256MB RAM                        | Windows 2000/XP, Internet Explorer 5.1, Windows Media Player 7.1 (Windows XP and Media Player 10 for Napster To Go) | Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP                                           | Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, Windows Media Player 7                                                    | Windows 2000/XP, Internet Explorer 5.5                           |
| Software download size       | 1MB                                                | 30MB                                                              | 5.8MB                                                                                                               | 21.5MB                                                             | 2.9MB                                                                                            | 22.5MB                                                           |
| Price per track              | \$0.32 to \$0.49 (around 18p to 28p)               | 79p                                                               | 68p (package), 79p (single tracks)                                                                                  | 89p to 99p                                                         | 69p to 79p                                                                                       | 79p                                                              |
| Rental prices                | N/A                                                | N/A                                                               | £10-£15 per month                                                                                                   | N/A                                                                | 1p per track per play                                                                            | £10-£15 per month                                                |
| Audio format                 | MP3                                                | AAC                                                               | WMA                                                                                                                 | ATRAC-3                                                            | WMA                                                                                              | WMA                                                              |
| Bit rate                     | 256-320Kbit/s                                      | 128Kbit/s                                                         | 128Kbit/s                                                                                                           | 132Kbit/s                                                          | 128Kbit/s                                                                                        | 128Kbit/s                                                        |
| DRM limitations on purchases | No DRM                                             | Five computers, unlimited CD burns, unlimited players (iPod only) | Three/unlimited computers, unlimited players (Napster To Go only), unlimited CD burns (Napster Light only)          | Three computers, 10 CD burns, unlimited players (Sony only)        | Five unlimited computers or players, three to 10 CD burns (depending on artist)                  | Five computers or portable players, 10 CD burns                  |